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Army and Empire:

British Soldiers on the American Frontier, 1757-1775

By Michael N. McConnell

(Studies in War, Society, and the Military. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 2004, xx+231 pp. ISBN 0-8032-3233-0)

At the end of the Seven Years' War, Britain's empire stretched from Africa to India and from Canada to the Caribbean. Secondary sources often describe Britain after the Treaty of Paris as the world's "leading" or "preeminent" colonial power. But as Michael N. McConnell shows, the British grip on the edges of its domain was shaky.

McConnell, a specialist in American colonial history at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, wrote about the American frontier in his earlier work, *A Country Between: The Upper Ohio and Its Peoples, 1724-1774* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992). *Army and Empire* describes the decade and a half between the end of the Seven Years' War and the start of the American Revolution. Pontiac's uprising and lesser conflicts kept life on the American frontier from being entirely peaceful, but McConnell does not dwell on the bloodshed of the time, focusing instead on the daily lives of soldiers and their families.

The book's seven well-organized chapters examine "the army's role as an agent of empire on Britain's frontier in America" (xviii). Indeed, absent a sizable British civilian population or powerful economic sway in such places as Florida, the Ohio Valley, and much of Canada, the army was the primary tool used to establish and maintain Britain's new possessions. *Army and Empire* addresses basic yet not widely examined questions about this role, such as: Where were British forts? What were they made of? Who lived in them? What activities did they do in these fortifications? What did they own, eat, and do to stay healthy?

In discussing fundamental What-was-it-like-to-live-there

questions, McConnell's work is somewhat reminiscent of a nature documentary and intriguing in the same way. What was life like for British soldiers on the frontier? It is hard to summarize, as this book makes clear. They were not all English, for one thing. They were also Irish or Scottish or German, or in a tiny number of cases, African. Soldiers on the Gulf coast sweated in the humid climate, fought ravenous insects, died from tropical diseases, and dreaded destructive seasonal storms. Soldiers in Canada looked forward to the near-elimination of infectious diseases in winter, but the severe cold also effectively halted most activity and isolated some forts for weeks at a time. In all regions, soldiers ate reasonably well, but only because they hunted, fished, and gardened rather than relying solely on nutrient-deficient army rations. Common soldiers may have owned some ceramics and other goods, thereby participating in a growing consumer revolution in the Atlantic world, but the army neither as an institution nor a lifestyle encouraged the accumulation of material things. With many assertions, the author takes a "on one hand, on the other hand" approach and notes when evidence also points to the contrary.

The sourcing for *Army and Empire* is impressive. It is not uncommon to find more sources listed in an end note than there are sentences in the paragraph to which it refers. The author makes solid use of military reports and the papers of British army officers. Archaeological sources have helped flesh out pictures of the past that may have been more weakly documented in contemporary texts. A discussion of what soldiers' skeletons reveal about health and medicine of the time is particularly enlightening.

Using these sources, McConnell provides a vivid picture of struggles in the woods and on the coast. Distance and weather proved formidable foes for the redcoats guarding the edges of empire. The British North American frontier, McConnell observes, "was better measured in weeks or

months than in miles." Pack horses died by the dozens during the rough travel on the northern region's only real road. Ice, wind, and waves hampered travel by water, and soldiers frequently exhausted themselves while hauling supplies on foot to fortifications.

The fortifications varied. Some, like Fort Pitt, housed several hundred soldiers and their families. Small towns grew up outside of the walls of larger forts. Other forts were barely more than a wooden stockade and contained fewer than twenty souls. Repair work and rebuilding these fortifications was virtually ceaseless. Grazing animals damaged earthen ramparts. Buildings made from green wood by hurried carpenters required near-endless reconstruction. Hurricanes smashed into forts on the Gulf, floods swept into Fort Pitt, and wooden structures rotted everywhere.

This work took its toll on the central purpose of the army's presence in America: to convey power. Sylvia Frey in her book *The British Soldier in America: A Social History of Military Life in the Revolutionary Period* writes about soldiers' daily routines, such as guard duty and hauling garbage. "Important as they were," Frey writes, "cleanliness, order and security were peripheral duties; the central work of the soldier was preparation to take the field." On the western frontier, McConnell says, martial preparations gave way to the crush of work needed to stay fed and sheltered. This, he says, "reflected the chronic problem of Britain's army — or any professional army — between wars: as the 'friction of peace' took hold, as veterans died or left the ranks, as most waking hours were spent on work not strictly related to training for battle, regiments' military efficiency declined."

Description of almost any form of eighteenth-century life can appall readers today, and McConnell's examination of life in frontier forts is no different. Though the book keeps the hardships in context — sickness rates in American forts compared favorably to those of British garrisons in other parts

of the world, for example — soldiers themselves, especially officers, who were generally socially isolated from their men, saw service in the American wilderness as particularly difficult. The word “exile” appears throughout the book. One young ensign assigned to duty at Fort Niagara wrote home of his upcoming “banishment.”

Historian Fred Anderson has written of the “hollowness of empire in North America.” By the time *Army and Empire* concludes the same, McConnell’s readers will likely have already reached it on their own many pages before then, persuaded by story after story of crumbling forts, debilitating illnesses, draining physical labor, and declining martial skills.

— *Thomas Scales*